

Big Business AND the Media

MARCH 1978

By BERNARD Ruben

Introduction

orig 1 Institute For
Democratic Communications

The Institute for Democratic Communication was formed to do First Amendment related studies, particularly on press and speech subjects, and to actively further the great freedoms incorporated in the Bill of Rights. At its founding conference in the early spring of 1976, 50 leaders from the press and academic fields were asked to suggest the most important matters that deserved priority attention. All the conferees agreed that high on any list would be a study of business-press relationships. Taking that good advice, I set in motion the process which led to this book.

We are grateful to the Shell Oil Company for providing a grant to the Institute for the research phase. It should be noted that Shell attached no conditions to the financial support and had no role whatever in the undertaking. More corporations should show such sense through similarly detached support of objective research.

In this study five practitioner-professors with allied interests and experiences in the mass media of communication apply social science techniques to describe and analyze current and traditional relationships between big business and the communications industry. The purpose is to show the interdependencies and antagonisms that exist between these two vital forces in our society. Our hope is that this analysis will lead to more constructive attitudes and actions in the public interest.

Large American corporations, including the titans of the press (print and electronic) are facing new and at times unprecedented social and economic changes which make public accounting and accountability absolutely necessary. Resultant shifts in political attitudes have transformed the business and the press environments radically within the span of the last decade. It is likely, that other substantial alterations will follow hard on the heels of recent developments, stimulated by basic laws of supply and demand and by struggles between competing entrepreneurs operating within a democratic society.

Basic assumptions bearing upon the public's right to know about the workings of vital private and public institutions are now under careful scrutiny by managers and private citizens who recognize that access to the mass media gives power to individuals and to organizations. Conversely, denial of access, in any degree, is denial of power.

Economic and political power and social responsibility are all linked. As vital instruments of public education, the print and electronic mass media describe power and responsibility issues constructively through objective reporting and honest appraisals. Failure to provide such work inevitably leads to misconceptions, distortions, and worse.

Newly active participants in the media situation, in so far as the struggle goes to create impressions outside of the area of direct product advertising,

are many of the more prominent and large commercial and industrial corporations of the United States. In effect, another partner has joined the Fourth Estate. The large corporations which remain aloof to the trend are watching the progress of the more daring denizens of business.

Central questions dealt with in the analyses of this book include these which concern every responsible citizen: Is big business beginning to take an active role, attempting to influence the formation of public opinion in the country? Are the mass media competently reporting the significant economic stories, as well as all the attendant political consequences? What should be the ethical and professional standards of those who are so influential in setting the public agenda? How do key "gatekeepers" of ideas protect the public interest?

The authors represented in this book are known for their specific contributions to mass media literature and to the day-by-day chores of the working reporters who must make sense out of an incredibly complicated mosaic made up of events, trends, and background factors. Here they apply their professional training and experiences across a broad range of specific media works. In this study specifically, the key aspects of one of the biggest business-media stories of our time are put into focus.

The contributors decided to handle the data gathered about hundreds of corporations and from the press corps according to the following pattern. In Chapter 1, I deal with the political-governmental situations and ramifications. In Chapter 2, Otto Lerbinger discusses the public relations-economic situation. Following are Chapter 3, by Robert Smith, on the electronic media and Chapter 4, by Robert Baram, on the print media. In the last chapter, Roger Kahle reviews materials bearing upon the opinions of elites from the press and business worlds in order to set the basis for an understanding of how key leaders think and might act.

For the general reader, the results of this study should provide a better understanding of a major new area where powerful forces compete and cooperate. For the reader from the business or press sector, this analysis offers indispensable information, largely unavailable before. For the student of politics in school or on the job, the appraisals should trigger new interests in business and in the press. For the authors, this work represents one of the best ways we know to enhance the First Amendment to our Constitution.

As editor, I thank my colleagues for much work, advice, and cheer. Special thanks to Jean Reinhard, the administrative assistant to the Institute for Democratic Communication, for technical suggestions and help in the typing of the manuscript.

Bernard Rubin

Director, Institute for Democratic
Communication